THE GOD WHO LIVES IN OUR LOVE
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Luke 2: 1-7
I John 4: 7-12, 16

"So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."
I John 4: 16 (NRSV)

We thank you, O God, for this moment within the life of our church – for the faithfulness of those who preceded us, and for the bright, hopeful future. We thank you for all the ways the angels song of peace and goodwill is conveyed every day of the year. But most of all we thank you for the love – for its simplicity – and its power – and its hope. May we hear the message of Christmas as if for the first time. Amen.

> "Merry Christmas! What right do you have to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? Out upon Merry Christmas! What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money: a time for finding yourself a year older and not an hour richer: a time for balancing your books. If I could work my will every idiot that goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!"

That is Ebeneezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. He is one of the great characters in all of fiction, and his story, told and dramatized everywhere every December is one of the great morality tales in all of literature. It is also a compelling articulation of the meaning and effect of Christianity, whether Dickens intended it or not.

I was first introduced to A Christmas Carol when, as a child, I was bundled up on a December night and taken to the Fifth Avenue Methodist Church

where most of my father's big family were members. The church put on a production of A Christmas Carol every year. It couldn't have been much as theatre goes, and, frankly I found most of it pretty boring. But there were a few moments – when Scrooge is in bed and from the cellar comes the sound of clanking chains and the slow, steady thump of footsteps on the stairs. As Scrooge sat up in bed, terrified, so did I, sat up in the pew, as the ghost of Jacob Marley, Scrooge's long dead business partner and only friend emerged out of the darkness, dragging his money boxes and clanking chains behind him. It certainly got my attention and I think I might even have begun to get the point. I loved Tiny Tim, of course, and Bob Cratchit and the way it all ends – everybody happy, Scrooge redeemed, such a solid biblical point, although I didn't know that at the time – namely the power of love expressed in giving, to change and redeem and save human life.

The Methodists decided to reinforce the drama with "O Holy Night" sung by a soprano with a vibrato at least half-an-octave wide, and literally put my teeth on edge when she reached and did not quite make the high note – "O Night Divine." And then Santa Clause appeared and all the children present were invited to come forward to receive a small cardboard container with a string handle full of chocolate candy. What more could a nine year old want?

I have my great grandfather's complete set of Dickens, published in 1867, and each year I pull Christmas Stories from the shelf and skim A Christmas Carol and remember sitting in the pew as Marley's ghost appears, but also about how close to the mark Charles Dickens was.

Christianity is about the power of love to change, redeem and save, to make a difference in the lives of individual men and women, and more broadly, in the life of society.

Nowhere is it expressed with more straightforward simplicity and power than in these words:

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God… God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

Those words are from one of three small letters found near the end of the New Testament. They were written well into the second century BCE when two things are happening to the early Christian Church, official Roman

opposition and the beginning of persecution and the Christians are fighting among themselves… the usual conflicts – morality and doctrine.

The letters contain an astonishing idea – God is love – and when human beings love, God lives in them and they live in God. It is still a radical and unusual way to think about God. Earlier this fall we thought about the God debates initiated by several popular authors, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchins, presenting their case for atheism. We considered their critique of religion scientific, irrational, exclusivist, closed-minded and potentially dangerous. It's a movement now. A recent large billboard showed Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem with the bold announcement: "You Know It's a Myth. Celebrate Reason This Year."

The question of God is as old as human history: every people, every civilization and culture has grappled with it. The earliest philosophers concluded that if there were a god, god must be perfect in every way. God, the philosophers said, has no needs, certainly no feelings and emotions. The Greeks had a word for it: the apathea of God – from which we get "apathy": God without feelings, hope, expectations, love. God, if God exists, must be pure reason, pure truth, pure light, completely separate from the world and human life. The philosopher's favorite definition of God was "the unmoved mover."

Christianity suggests and believes precisely the opposite: that God does have feelings, that God does have to do with the world and human life: that God is love and is hopelessly almost relentlessly in love with the world and human beings: that God exists in the world and human love: not in temples and cathedrals and churches: not in buildings of any sort – but in human love: not in esoteric ritual and mystical disciplines but in love, in human acts of love.

Twenty centuries later that still challenges. Harvard Professor Diana Eck, in her fine book Encountering God, says that Christianity has more to do with love than theology. "The language of faith is the language of affection… Faith language is analogous to the language we use when we say 'I love you.'"

You wouldn't know that of course if all you knew about Christianity was the kind of religion that makes news: harsh, judgmental, self-righteous, exclusive – burning other religion's holy books, picketing service person's

funerals to express contempt for a position on sexuality different from their own, crediting God with natural disasters and epidemics to make a point.

Eck says that religion takes the love of God and turns it upside down.

Barbara Reid, a professor of the New Testament at Catholic Theological Union in Hyde Park wrote recently that there are basically two different notions of God: a God of unending mercy and grace who forgives endlessly and accepts and embraces every human beings and a God of judgment, rewards the righteous and severely punished sinners. The God of reward and punishment is a lot easier to believe in, Reid observes. A God of mercy and grace, who forgives and loves unconditionally is hard to accept because we are not in control with this God. It is not about us but about God, and God's amazing love and the mystery of grace.

The church is the place where the God who is love, and who lives in human love is praised and worshipped and followed and taken seriously as a moral guide. A friend of mine, Dan McCullough, says that the purpose of the church is to tell every man and woman and child – "You are loved. You are loved more than you can possibly imagine, you are loved forever. You are loved by God."

> New born infant – child, adolescent, young adult,
> Middle age, elderly –
> Sick or well, employed or unemployed,
> Married, divorced, single by choice or not,
> Liberal, conservative, gay, straight,
> Traditional believer, doubting former believer,
> Skeptic, agnostic, atheist,
> Child of poverty who comes here for tutoring because there is someone here who is happy to see her – and seems to actually care about her,
> Homeless man who stops in every day because he knows it is warm, and there will be a bowl of soup and he will not be asked to leave because of his appearance,
> The anxious, frightened, stressed out,
> The lonely elderly

You are loved more than you can imagine. You are loved forever by God.

The miracle of love is that the more you love the more you are alive. Physicians know the literal truth of that Pediatricians have long known the life enhancing, life-giving power of love – administered in a loving touch, a caress, a safe lap, cradled in a rocking chair.

If you are fortunate you learned how to love – how to give your love, your gifts, your resources, your life. At its best it is what Christmas is about, the excitement of gifts to be received for the young, but for the older, more mature – the yearly reminder that it is not only better to give than to receive, it is a lot happier.

It is why we give gifts and send greeting cards and those occasionally arduous, long Christmas letters: it is why we smile more and are a little kinder and more generous and shower sweets and cookies and special candies on one another – a yearly reminder of what it means to be fully and truly alive: to be an instrument of love, of God's life – giving love in the world.

If you are fortunate you learned that a long time ago. If not, it's never too late.

"I am here tonight to warn you, that you have yet a chance and a hope…" Marley's ghost says to Scrooge.

Scrooge is visited by three spirits – who show him his past, his pitiful, mean and greedy present, and a future after he is gone. He awakens a changed man, converted, redeemed, saved. It's Christmas morning. He sends a boy to buy the biggest turkey in the butcher's window to be sent to Bob Cratchit's house and gives him an extra shilling. He becomes almost giddy with happiness wishing startled neighbors and shop keepers a "Merry Christmas" – asks a man he treated harshly for forgiveness – "My dear Mr. Scrooge, are you serious?" he says. Scrooge goes to church, pats children on the head, and finds great pleasure seeing people celebrating Christmas. He goes to his office where Bob Cratchit is working on Christmas morning, sends him home immediately – raises his salary – and accepts Cratchit's invitation to Christmas dinner.

The last page of A Christmas Carol…

> “Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all and infinitely more – and to Tiny Tim, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, and as good a man as the old city knew. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh… His own heart laughed… and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well…” Dickens concludes, “May that be said of us as well. And so, as Tiny Tim observed, “God bless us, every one!”

A contemporary poet, Wendell Berry.

> I know that I have life
> only insofar as I have love.
>
> I have no love
> except it come from Thee.
>
> Help me, please, to carry
> this candle against the wind.
>
> Beloved, let us love one another
> because love is from God.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.

Amen.